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Rhythm in Literature after the Crisis in Verse

PETER DAYAN AND DAVID EVANS

There must be in the poem a number such that it prevents counting.
Paul Claudel, *Cent phrases pour éventails* (*One hundred phrases for fans*).¹

What is rhythm? Can there be a general theory of it? To the latter question, the obvious contemporary answer is no. There is nothing one can say about rhythm that engages with everything that we hold rhythm to be; depending on your point of view, it is either too broad a concept (perhaps, indeed, it is not a single concept at all), or too elusive. In the necessary absence of a general theory, theorising about rhythm, like attempts to define rhythm, can only be productive within a well-defined context. This volume, then, does not aim to say what rhythm is. But it does attempt to provide a theory, heretofore lacking, of how rhythm has functioned within precisely that literary tradition which one might see as responsible for our contemporary view of rhythm as impossible to theorise.

The slipperiness, the evasiveness, of the concept of rhythm in literature is, from the point of readers, poets, and critics, a relatively modern phenomenon. There seems to have been a time, one might say, in the literatures of all nations, when the producers and consumers of literature knew where to look, in the first place, for rhythm. Rhythm was something that happened in verse and thanks to the dynamics of verse; prosodic convention allowed us to appreciate it. Of course, no one would have denied that there was rhythm elsewhere, in prose as in music, but the rhythm of poetry was of a special kind, a higher kind than that in prose, and its connection with the rules of versification was unquestioned. That perceived privilege of the connection between rhythm and versification lasted until the nineteenth century. It was in France that its breakdown happened most clearly and most self-consciously. It was the French who most directly identified at the time what has, since 1885, been known as the ‘crisis in verse’.

Until then, French poetry, like poetry elsewhere, had been largely content with the age-old comfortable assumption that everyone knew what and where poetic rhythm was. When Baudelaire, for example, refers to rhythm and rhyme as the formal conditions of poetry, his definition of rhythm is inseparable from prosody.² However, that close-knit alliance of poetry, prosody, and rhythm can only hold for as long as poetry is taken to be essentially prosodic. As prose poetry, free verse, and more radical experiments with the spacing of words on the page began to assert their right to be considered poetic (Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés* (*A Throw of the Dice*) was, after all, published with the subtitle 'Poème', and Baudelaire, having written poems in prose, hesitated between the titles *Le Spleen de Paris* (*Paris Spleen*) and *Petits poèmes en prose* (*Little Poems in Prose*)), they placed rhythm before a stark choice. When poetry divorces itself from the analysable conventions of prosody, rhythm must decide which of its two parents to follow. Will it remain rooted in prosody? in which case, non-prosodic poetry cannot be rhythmical; or will non-prosodic poetry proclaim itself as still rhythmical? in which case, prosody loses its claim to be the paradigmatic generator of rhythm.

A crisis in rhythm was, then, the immediate consequence of the crisis in verse which Mallarmé announced with memorable gravity in 'Crise de vers', a play on *crise de nerfs* (nervous breakdown). 'La littérature ici subit une exquise crise, fondamentale' (Literature is now undergoing an exquisite crisis, fundamental), he wrote.³ As Mallarmé informed his audience in his Oxbridge lectures on 'La Musique et les Lettres': 'J'apporte en effet des nouvelles. Les plus surprenantes. Même cas ne se vit encore. — On a touché au vers' (Indeed, I bring most surprising news. The like of which has not been seen before. — Verse has been tampered with).⁴ In this crisis, rhythm's choice was clear and decisive. It sided, not with traditional prosody, but with the new poetry, liberated from prosodic convention. Certainly, that is how post-crisis writers presented it. The concept of rhythm remained absolutely central to their attempts to describe the special quality of poetry and increasingly, as the distinction between poetry and other forms of literature became looser, of literature in general. As Apollinaire testified in 'Les Poètes d'aujourd'hui' (1909), 'le rythme a pris soudain une importance que les initiateurs, les destructeurs, les révolutionnaires si l'on veut de l'ancienne métrique n'avaient point soupçonnée' (suddenly, rhythm assumed an importance which the initiators, the destroyers, the revolutionaries if you will of the former metrics had not at all anticipated).⁵ However, there seemed to be no

means to analyse that rhythm as precisely as the study of versification had allowed the mechanics of prosody to be schematised. Nothing replaced prosody — except for a persistent analogy with music that remained as vague as the concept of rhythm itself, shifting from a conception of poetic rhythm as universal to one which could allow for an infinitely varied individuality. As Camille Mauclair claimed in Marinetti's *Enquête internationale sur le vers libre* (1909): 'Il y a autant de vers libres qu'il y a de poètes, et (...) leurs musiques ne se ressemblent pas' (There are as many kinds of free verse as there are poets, and (...) the music of each is unique).⁶

Mauclair, responding to an international 'enquête' or inquiry, did not distinguish between French poets, and poets of other nations. To him, as to the French in general, the crisis and its consequences, though born and first understood in France, were universal in their implications for poetry. In historical terms, there is, as we shall see, a sense in which this was never true: the link between prosody and poetry was not everywhere broken so easily, or in the same way. Nonetheless, one of the key features of the behaviour of rhythm in the French crisis was indeed replicated internationally: however poetry defined itself, whatever form it took, rhythm was perceived to remain an essential quality of it.

The theory that we aim to inaugurate in this volume, then, concerns the pervasiveness of rhythm after the crisis of verse; the reasons for which rhythm remained such a persistent reference point in literature despite the loss of its prosodic moorings. It seemed to us that, whereas the critical literature overflows with many excellent, precise and detailed analyses of the rhythms of specific poetic and literary texts, no serious attempt to arrive at a theoretical discourse explaining the enduring importance of rhythm as a concept had yet been attempted. One obstacle to the construction of such a discourse could be described as a sort of hangover from the days of prosody. Contemporary critical work on the concept of rhythm in poetry remains profoundly rooted in the analysis of national traditions. In France, for example, over the last twenty years, the most striking and influential evolution in the critical understanding of poetic rhythm has resulted from the creation of a new technique for analysing metre in French verse, 'métrico-métrie', by Benoît de Cornulier and the Centre d'Études Métriques at the Université de Nantes.⁷ Where theories of rhythm have sought to emancipate themselves from this prosodic focus, they have unfortunately not been able to replace it with any other focus in literature. Covering a much wider variety of rhythmic

contexts than Cornulier, Henri Meschonnic's formidable *Critique du rythme* remains a defining work in the field over twenty-five years after its first publication. Boldly rejecting any correspondences between rhythms in literature and those of the body or the natural world, Meschonnic analyses rhythm in a wide variety of sources including newspaper articles as well as literary texts. Unlike Cornulier, he locates rhythm in language in all its forms. But like Cornulier, he fails to explain just what makes a literary rhythm, as opposed to any other kind;⁸ his work, though magnificent as a critique, gives no foothold for a theory of rhythm in literature.

Seen from the point of view of post-crisis literature, this seems to us an inevitable limitation of any critical approach that focuses solely on rhythm in language, especially within a single language. The truly distinctive impulse of post-crisis poets is their determination to suggest the existence of a kind of rhythm whose relationship with the actual tangible dynamics of language is resolutely and cunningly elusive, a rhythm which somehow escapes every one of the wide variety of analytical frameworks which scholars might attempt to impose on it. It figures itself never as simply within poetry, but always as between discourses, media, or types of experience. For that reason, it refuses to settle within the purview of any disciplinary approach. Indeed, it evades the scientific as well as the linguistic—not to mention the musicological. To give a particularly interesting recent example: in January 2009, a special issue of the scientific journal *Cortex* appeared, entitled *The Rhythmic Brain*. Its introduction begins thus: 'Music is a universal but still poorly understood form of human communication in which abstract patterns of sound can cause people to cry, laugh, dance, reflect, bond and even mate. Rhythm is a basic organising principle of music.'⁹ This seems reasonable, as does the implication that rhythm can be analysed as an organising principle within the medium of music. The rest of the issue continues to assume a certain working definition of 'music' as containing, precisely, 'patterns', within which rhythm can be analysed as an 'organising principle'. This analysable patterning, however, corresponds to the very definition of rhythm that the crisis in verse aimed to contest. It would perhaps not be illegitimate to perceive the extraordinary success of that contestation in the difficulty which the *Cortex* team found in trying to reach a consensus on where rhythm is actually to be located:

The editorial process was extremely interesting and even challenging, not least since the word rhythm can mean different things to different people, while terms such as beat, metrical/non-metrical, simple/complex rhythm, conventional/unconventional rhythm and so forth, can be the topic of heated debate.¹⁰

The question is: can this challenge be met by further research into the nature of rhythm within any given medium? Or does rhythm, as we conceive it post-crisis, actually contain a constitutive resistance to all such research? We have assumed the latter: it seems that the more rigorous, the more scientific one attempts to be, the less able one is to cope with the meaning of rhythm in post-crisis verse. The solution to the problem, we thought, would be to approach it, not from one point of view, but from several simultaneously.

Our idea, then, was, for the first time, perhaps, to bring together studies on literature in different European languages around the concept of rhythm in the post-crisis period, referring (always, centrally) to poetry, but also to many different media and kinds of experience described as rhythmic. We trusted that this multi-cultural approach would provide a healthy remedy to the inward-looking tendency of the ways in which rhythm has hitherto been conceptualised and theorised, and would suit the topic particularly well in that, precisely, what rhythm seems to do after the crisis in verse is to slip its anchor in analysable specifics — in the first place the specifics of a given language, but also, more subtly, in verbal language in general. We also hoped that the differences between the history of the crisis in different national traditions would prevent us from settling into comfortable assumptions about rhythm's relocation after the divorce between poetry and metrical convention. And so it proved.

The project was thus from the outset conceived of as an interchange around a central question, in which a diversity of perspectives would not only keep consensus productively at bay, but would continually lead back to the reasons for rhythm's elusiveness. We therefore began the project with live debate: two memorable study days in Edinburgh, during which first drafts of all the papers in this volume were presented, chewed over, and discussed with a steadily increasing sense of the richness and complexity of the subject, and its refusal of all stable conceptualisation.¹¹ Arriving at conclusions was not the order of the day. But the discussion certainly did fulfil our aim of bringing out the way that rhythm becomes both central to literature and endlessly slippery as a concept after the crisis in verse; and the variety of national traditions equally certainly served to question single-language-centred assumptions.

David Gascoigne's presentation of the multi-lingual and sometimes, one might say, anti-lingual movement that was Dada demonstrated how rhythm was kept alive by artists of radically contrasting aesthetic persuasions, by situating it somewhere before, above, or beyond language conceived of as a means of making sense. It could, rejecting

words entirely, be in drum-beats (would that be poetry? would the question matter?); it could also be found in poems largely written in words unknown to linguists, whose similarity to what the Dadaists called 'negro' (i.e. primitive) poetry was intended to suggest the existence of fundamental human rhythms, obscured by Western civilisation, whose specific qualities, of course, the Dadaist was careful never to elucidate. David Gascoigne showed that it is always possible to find a way to explain how we create rhythm from such texts, how we find strong and weak beats, for example, and this, in poetry, always depends on our understanding of language and its morphology. As soon as there is anything that looks like language, in other words, rhythm depends on our understanding of it. Yet Dada decisively breaks any link between that understanding and the sense of a national tradition that validates it. Rhythm is essential to Dada; but equally essential is the refusal of any stable context that would allow any evaluation of that rhythm, any appreciation of what it is or why it works as literary. A Dada rhythm might as well be African as French, German, or English; so it is really, plainly, none of those, and it can be situated precisely nowhere. That is how rhythm contributes to the great Dada enterprise: we are convinced it is there, but we become ridiculous as soon as we try to say what or where it is.

Dada's multi-lingual iconoclasm contrasted strikingly with the history of Russian verse, presented by Barry Scherr. The prosodic conventions of nineteenth-century Russian art poetry did not have the ancient roots in the language that French, German, British or Italians claimed for their verse; but, after a period of experimentation around the time of the Revolution, they survived far more generally into the twentieth century, thanks to the cultural conservatism both of the Bolsheviks and of their emigré opponents. However, in that context, when poets of the middle of the twentieth century were brave enough to disrupt conventional rhythm, the effect was to bring the issues around rhythm into the starkest possible relief. Prosody, for them, could not be disentangled from its socio-political implications; any refusal of it immediately brought to the fore the question of what poetry might be apart from its social function, and the indeterminate nature of non-prosodic rhythm becomes, not merely observable, but an always disturbing presence.

This sense of disturbance was less often immediately evident in French and English literature thanks, it seemed, to a tactic that strangely emerged as, in a way, common to Virginia Woolf (as

presented by Emma Sutton) and Paul Valéry (David Evans's subject). Both imply that rhythm, for the writer, somehow precedes words. Valéry describes himself feeling a rhythm, discovering a rhythm, before the words of the poem appear to materialise it; Woolf makes of the precedence of rhythm a principle of literature, describing words being put 'on the backs of rhythm'. This might be taken to suggest, contrary to our initial assumption, that post-crisis poetic rhythm is not, in fact, elusive and indeterminate; that it can have a solid presence of its own, which the poet perceives and materialises. This would be comfortingly similar to the old idea of prosodic rhythm, whereby the linguistic rhythms as manifested in the text fulfil formal conditions which precede composition. However, careful analysis of the context of these described experiences of rhythm-preceding-words shows how problematic they remain. No rhythm exists without a material in which to manifest itself; that much is clear, as is the self-conscious craftsmanship to which both authors devoted a great deal of time and effort. The much admired artful work with the matter of words, by Valéry and by Woolf, is clear evidence of this; indeed, Valéry is perfectly conscious of it, and describes the process of poetic composition from the outset as one of working with and through the peculiar properties of the French language in all its rich detailing. On a larger scale, in *The Voyage Out*, the presence, absence, and functioning of rhythm depend, in fact, on many oppositions that are plainly verbally mediated, not the least of which is a complex gender politics. The material of the rhythm before words remains intangible; whereas the rhythm that Woolf and Valéry create actually depends on the material characteristics of the words in which they create it. One cannot, therefore, conceptualise it as a pre-existent rhythm which the words subsequently clothe, so to speak. Once one has followed the logic of their presentation of rhythm through to this point, the disturbing force of rhythm re-emerges. As forcefully as in the Russian poets' work, rhythm comes to represent something that is as elusive in its source and matter as it is essential to literature; it not only invites disruption, it actually is disruption, disruption of our common sense of how we ought to be able to understand and situate the value of what we read.

Simon Jarvis, after reading out John Wilkinson's *The Speaking Twins* (an unforgettable moment), contributed another way of interpreting the experience of Valéry or Woolf. Wilkinson's verse rhythms fiercely resist conceptualisation, and yet remain irresistible, unmistakable, vigorous, determined. This ceases to appear critically problematic if

one accepts that just as, for more than a century, musicians have maintained that they can think, non-verbally, in music — ‘*penser musicalement*’, according to Debussy’s expression¹² — so we might accept that there is ‘thinking in rhythm’. This seems, indeed, to be the experience of many poets, and of many readers; and close analysis of the way we respond to poetry confirms this. Post-crisis, however, ‘thinking in rhythm’ cannot be neatly aligned with any definable kind of rhythm; and the problem remains of determining which rhythms, if any, are specifically those of poetry, or perhaps even more problematically, of literature.

On that subject, the example of Dino Campana, analysed by Helen Abbott, was eloquent. It is plain that for him, rhythm in itself is not necessarily good or bad, poetic or unpoetic. Rhythm can be perceived as something repetitive, tired, and mundane; or, on the contrary, musical, magic, sacred. It can shade into a weary trudge, or into the walk of a beautiful woman. These opposing rhythmical modes reveal obsessions which shape poetic rhythm, but do not define it. The distinguishing characteristic of the poetic rhythm seems to be nothing more precise than a certain power to invite the imagination onwards, towards a point beyond the present, where easily perceptible rhythm is absorbed into something that transcends it, as the rhythm of water can become a flow.

Rhythm thus becomes dependent, not merely on specific properties present in the material, but also on a movement of the imagination that actually leads to a dissolving of those properties. Similarly, the key to the reading of Julio Cortázar’s *Los Premios* offered by Carolina Orloff and Peter Dayan became an imaginary rhythm which, in the end, denies its own roots in the material. Pre-crisis rhythm can be analysed as an objective property of verse or music; but rhythm in *Los Premios* turns out not to be an objective property of anything. Generally speaking, the novel’s protagonists are thoroughly sceptical of the possibility that rhythm might have any real presence in their lives. The only character who is convinced that rhythm, the rhythm of poetry or of music, is also an objective property of the world, is presented as out on a limb and intellectually unconvincing. Yet there are certain kinds of experience that seem able to change people’s minds, temporarily at least: falling in love; and art—including, perhaps, reading *Los Premios*. Both require a conviction, not unlike that of Valéry, Woolf, or Campana, that there exists a rhythm, a rhythm before any specific words, which makes a certain kind of sense of the world — a sense qualitatively different from the kind of

meaning that words might make without it. However, that conviction, in *Los Premios*, remains unstable. People fall out of love as easily as they fall in love; rhythm vanishes as quickly as it appears, and as it vanishes, we see that the sceptical characters, though they were wrong to deny the importance of rhythm, were right not to believe in its fixed presence in the real world. That instability mirrors both the ambiguity of rhythm in Campana's verse, and the difficulty of conceptualising the rhythm in literature that might have existed before the words that materialise it. Rhythm remains something central to art, and yet curiously, perhaps infuriatingly, and certainly healthily, resistant to becoming a discernable object of any truth-discourse.

Eric Prieto's subtle analysis of Jacques Réda's versification showed how even within verse that continues to depend on (though not simply to reproduce) the good old conventions of prosody, post-crisis rhythm can retain that paradoxical character: it remains indubitably central, and indubitably linked, somehow, to analysable features of the work, and yet at the same time it is endlessly slippery whenever we try to pin down its presence as a verifiable truth. Réda's contribution to the maintenance of that paradoxical character expresses itself in his interweaving of the individual, the personal, with the traditional. His verse is based on his own modern re-shaping of traditional prosodic functions; particularly, the standard syllable count which was the staple of French metrics for centuries before the crisis. However, through an analogy with jazz rhythms and the semi-improvisatory aspect of swing, Réda introduces a perspective which links rhythm in poetry to a phenomenological and post-structuralist discourse on rhythm emphasising its necessary rôle in the construction of the subject; this in turn poses the question of the individual in art. We are nothing without rhythm; but is the rhythm we need uniquely ours? Réda's rhythm certainly has characteristics which are, recognisably and demonstrably, uniquely his. Furthermore, his verse, like jazz, is also happy to allow a certain personal rhythmic freedom to the interpreter. And yet, as Eric Prieto pointed out, just as important to Réda as the individuality of rhythm are the limits to that individuality. The jazz with which he identifies is not simply improvisation, not the 'free jazz' of, say, Ornette Coleman. Similarly, the rhythms of his poetry are not entirely free; he is not entirely free to choose them. Simon Jarvis describes Wilkinson's work as 'unfree verse', and not only because poetic rhythm requires constraints; it is also because rhythm in literature, after the crisis in verse, always comes from elsewhere, comes upon the poem from elsewhere. It is indeed, as Valéry implied, felt to

precede words, perhaps to emerge from the world outside or beyond the poet, perhaps to speak for the primitive or even the universal; its manifestations are stubbornly individual, but it is never entirely under the control of the individual.

Any theory of such a rhythm must have the courage in the first place to confront, without resolving them, the innumerable paradoxes that have given it its distinctive place in literary discourse. Rather than trying to understand what rhythm is — an obviously impossible task — we should ask ourselves instead why literature seems to feed endlessly on a kind of thinking that is summed up under that word ‘rhythm’; and what, if any, are the constant, or at least typical, dynamics of its operation. Our aim in these essays is, then, to seek, not for the truth of rhythm, but for the way it has served the purposes of all those writers who, like us, cannot escape the conviction that ‘it don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing’. It is to rhythm itself that we would like to dedicate this volume.

NOTES

- 1 Paris, Gallimard, coll. ‘Poésie’, 1996, n. p.
- 2 See the essays ‘Théophile Gautier’ and ‘Auguste Barbier’, in Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, 2 vols, edited by Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, coll. ‘Bibliothèque de la Pléiade’, 1975–76), II, 105 and 145.
- 3 Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, 2 vols, edited by Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, coll. ‘Bibliothèque de la Pléiade’, 1998–2003), II, 205.
- 4 *Ibid.*, II, 64.
- 5 Guillaume Apollinaire, *Œuvres en prose complètes*, edited by Pierre Caizergues and Michel Décaudin, 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard, coll. ‘Bibliothèque de la Pléiade’, 1977–93), II, 915.
- 6 Milan, Editions de Poesia, 1909.
- 7 For a selection of excellent studies on French metrics, see Jean Mazaleyrat, *Pour une étude rythmique du vers français moderne* (Paris: Lettres Modernes Minard, 1963) and *Éléments de métrique française* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1974); Jacques Roubaud, ‘Mètre et vers (Deux applications de la métrique générative de Halle-Keyser)’, *Poétique* 7 (1971), 366–87 and *La Vieillesse d’Alexandre, essai sur quelques états récents du vers français* (Paris: Maspéro, 1978); Benoît de Cornulier, *Théorie du vers: Rimbaud, Verlaine, Mallarmé* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982) and *Art poétique: notions et problèmes de métrique* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1995); *Le Vers français: Histoire, théorie, esthétique*, edited by Michel Murat (Paris: Champion, 1999), as part of Champion’s series ‘Métrique française et comparée’; Jean-Michel Gouvard, *La Versification* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999) and *Critique du*

- vers* (Paris: Champion, 2000); Marc Dominicy, *Le Souci des apparences: huit études de poétique et de métrique* (Brussels: Éditions de l'Université, 1989); Valérie Beaudouin, *Mètre et rythmes du vers classique. Corneille et Racine* (Paris: Champion, 2002); *Métrique française et métrique accentuelle*, edited by Dominique Billy, Benoît de Cornulier and Jean-Michel Gouvard, special issue of *Langue française* 99 (1993); Clive Scott, *A Question of Syllables* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) and *Reading the Rhythm: The Poetics of French Free Verse 1910–1930* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).
- 8 See Henri Meschonnic, *Critique du rythme: anthropologie historique du langage* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1982), *Le Rythme et la vie* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1989) and *Politique du rythme, politique du sujet* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1995); Henri Meschonnic and Gérard Dessons, *Traité du rythme: du vers et des proses*, (Paris: Armand Colin, 2005 [1998]). For approaches to rhythm which locate a text's rhythmicity in variables drawn from linguistics, see Nicolas Ruwet, Jean-Michel Gouvard and Marc Dominicy, *Linguistique et poétique*, special edition of *Langue française* 110 (1996); Christine Michaux and Marc Dominicy, *Linguistic Approaches to Poetry*, special edition of *Belgian Journal of Linguistics* 15 (2001); *Rythmes*, edited by Lucie Bourassa, special edition of *Protée* 18:1 (1990); Lucie Bourassa, *Rythme et sens: Des processus rythmiques en poésie contemporaine* (Montreal: Les Éditions Balzac, 1993); Éliane Delente, *Le Rythme: Principe d'organisation du discours poétique*, doctoral thesis (Université de Caen, Linguistique française, 1992); Roger Pensom, *Accent and Metre in French: a history of the relation between linguistic accent and metrical practice in French, 1100–1900* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1998). Paul Fraisse, in *Psychologie du rythme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1974) proposes a psychological explanation for the importance of rhythm, while other studies such as Frédéric Deloffre, *Le Rythme de la prose: objet et méthodes de l'analyse* (The Hague: 1966; no publisher given) and *Rhythms: Essays in French Literature, Thought and Culture*, edited by Elizabeth Lindley and Laura MacMahon (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008) see rhythm at work across a wide variety of texts, far beyond the metrical.
- 9 Katie Overy and Robert Turner, 'Introduction', *Cortex* 45 (2009), 1.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 We are extremely grateful to the British Academy for its generous funding of these study days.
- 12 In more than one letter of 1915; see, for example, his *Correspondance 1884–1918*, edited by F. Lesure (Paris: Hermann, 1993), 358.